

The Deathworlders

Books 

Chapter 3: An Eventful Month

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It had been an eventful month, and an expensive one. Between the gasoline, motels, food and occasional laundrette, parking charges, and one or two fines, Terri Boone's one-woman trip from California to Texas had become a convoy of driven individuals across the whole of

the mainland US. They had everyone—a harassed single mother who'd left her kids with their grandparents for the duration, an older couple in a Winnebago, three teenagers from New York, a Romani woman from Ohio, a quiet guy from Birmingham whose battered olive-green windbreaker seemed to contain an infinite supply of cigarettes, a trucker who had been born in the UK, a construction worker from Florida, an Arizona state trooper.

She felt like something of an outsider. Every night, no matter where they stopped—motel, parking lot, truck stop, wherever—the Abductees always took some time to talk, to share their experience, and if Terri hadn't believed them before, the way their stories all corroborated one another soon dispelled any doubt. Hazel Naylor had turned out to be a better artist than Kevin Jenkins, and was bus providing the

artwork for a dossier on alien life that he was compiling out of all of their accounts. It was already remarkably thick.

It was also...discomforting. Terri had taken the opportunity to flip through it one day as Jenkins drove at the head of the convoy, leading them to meet their next Abductee in Colorado. The life it displayed came in a bewildering variety.

Small, skinny, large-eyed aliens with pointed ears who were clearly the inspiration for both the Roswell Greys and, she suspected, even older legends about elves. Tall, gangly, long-necked aliens which apparently came in two varieties—one with four legs and two arms, one with six and four. There were three-eyed aliens which one Abductee had aptly named “Cthulhu-sheep” who walked on their long fingertips and who apparently sounded like pigeons speaking Welsh.

There were three-fingered humanoids three times as tall as *homo sapiens* with huge ears the size of mixing bowls, who dripped with jewelery and lavish but scandalously revealing clothing.

There were huge brutish-looking humanoid ogres with four arms who apparently built wondrous cities from spun glass and polished, any one of which was beautiful enough to make a tourist weep. There was a species that would have seemed vaguely insectoid if not for the feathers and who apparently acid-etched their tribal markings into the chitin of their foreheads. One lifeform, and Hazel insisted the depiction was accurate, looked like nothing more than a flat, meaty worm in a square and ponderous-looking robot suit.

There were enormous shaggy-furred aliens with disproportionately small heads that looked like a cuttlefish

with floppy bunny ears, aliens which looked like a bizarre cross between a reptile and an ant, the things that had attacked Vancouver, seven-eyed ugly monstrosities where you couldn't tell where the flesh ended and their cybernetics began.

There were sketches of non-sophont alien life, too. Round little rat-things which were kind of cute if you didn't look at the face. scuttling ceiling-runners that seemed to combine the best properties of a squirrel and a centipede, loping dog-like things which one Abductee swore had evolved to graze on bushes that could run away. A cat, a perfectly ordinary house cat sitting prim, sleek and contemptuous in the middle of a menagerie of hexapedal, septapedal, decapedal, betentacled and limbless pets and fauna. One Abductee even claimed that there were actual honest-to-God dragons out

there, though everybody was a little too skeptical to include that one in the folio.

With the exception of the non-sentient fauna, they all had one thing in common—next to the reference human drawn on the same page, they all seemed tall, or at least slender and gracile. Speculation among the Abductees was that humanity was so comparatively small because if you grow up in a high-gravity world of *course* you would be small and sturdy.

There were illustrations of alien technology. Variants on the theme of rifle—the Abductees called them “Kinetic Pulse Guns”—which looked melted and useless until they were sketched in the hands of various races, at which point, while still recognizably being the same object, they had deformed and stretched into an appropriate shape for each one. There

was a note at the bottom of that page: “We aren’t in their database.”

There were alien starships in design ranging from the sleek and aesthetic to the square and functional, complete with sketchy but technical descriptions of their role and capacity, and provisional names. A light police gunboat was included for scale on the next page alongside an orbit-to-ground military dropship, a boxy affair which was pretty much nothing but steel, engines and arcane equipment which had been tentatively identified as “inertial compensation”. That in turn served for scale next to a light transport vehicle, which served as scale for the heavy bulk transport—a narrow spine flanked by ten huge boxy cargo bays each big enough to contain several shipping containers- and then *that* provided a scale reference for...

The Observatory. Those who had been there claimed it orbited Saturn, forever hidden from Earth's direct view. They noted the module on the end of an arm that its builders had graciously tacked on to give human visitors an environment at Earth's surface gravity and atmosphere. They noted that the station itself had only point-defence weaponry to defend itself from the risk of Hunter raids, and no other military equipment whatsoever. It had its own FTL "jump" system, which allowed it to hop instantly to the site of an appropriate beacon, though the beacon itself had to be carried by another ship at ordinary FTL speeds.

They had taken the time to Xerox a few copies in one town, and now all they needed to do to ascertain whether an Abductee was real or not was hand over the booklet. It was uncomfortable too look back at the long line of cars, trucks, campers and even the occasional big rig that they'd acquired

and understand that, by the evidence of it, all these people really HAD been taken by alien beings. Their stories all meshed, with all the seamless reality as if the same number of people had all been on vacation to London—there was just too much for even this many to have experienced it all, and everyone added something new, but the essentials were all identical.

She wasn't clear what the objective of their little pilgrimage was—it just seemed to be snowballing into this quest to personally check every single person in the USA who claimed to be an abductee and to add as much detail as they could, and it swept them up as it passed. Only a handful so far hadn't promptly thrown together a suitcase, grabbed their car keys, made a few phone calls and put their lives on hold.

She wondered where it would end.

It had been an eventful month, and a hectic one. A whole new facility was under construction, about halfway between Vancouver and Calgary, among the trees of a previously unheeded little town called Scotch Creek, and all of the alien specimens recovered from Rogers Arena had been transported up there in a military convoy under incredibly heavy guard just as soon as there'd been a cold locker for the bodies and enough crates for the technology.

The plumbing hadn't even been working on base when General Martin Tremblay had first set foot in Scotch Creek, and he'd been distracted the whole way up by what had bordered on being an argument with Stefan the night before he left about the sudden change of life. It wasn't drastically long-distance, but it did mean that they wouldn't see each

other every night. Stefan had not taken that well, but he'd been with Martin long enough to keep a level head and work through it rather than throw a tantrum and storm out.

Now, Tremblay took a deep breath and looked around the bare-plaster walls of his unfinished office, for lack of something better to do while an IT technician worked on getting his desktop hooked into the base network. The whole thing was an exercise in throwing together a working facility as quickly as possible.

Scientists had to excuse and apologise their way past men on ladders installing the lighting or wiring the computer network in a building where they hadn't even finished pouring the concrete on the third floor. Meetings with the physicists became meetings with the architects and builders, became meetings with his superiors, became a phone call to

the Minister of Defense and the Prime Minister, became a sandwich and coffee with Bartlett as he received a sitrep on NASA's unfolding mission to investigate the alien station around Saturn, became a meeting with the plumbers, became...and so on. It was nice to get a moment of calm and quiet, even if that moment did involve waiting awkwardly for somebody to finish installing some programs he could probably have installed himself.

There was a knock on the door. One of the physicists, Captain Claude Nadeau, saluted him. "we've had a development with the alien weaponry, sir, and we'd like to demonstrate." he said.

So much for quiet moments. Tremblay stood up and joined him, and they wove between stepladders, toolboxes, cables and busy workers to the firing range which, being the least

sophisticated room in the whole building, had long since been finished.

There was a pig carcass hanging at one end, and some technicians fussing around both an alien weapon and, next to it, a tangle of wires, components and bits that looked so experimental that it might catch fire.

“Okay. why the pig?” He asked.

“Pigs make a good human analogue.” Nadeau explained.

“They’re pretty similar to us in terms of density and composition.”

“Okay...?” Tremblay gestured for him to continue.

“Right. So, um...alien gun. You know about these already but we’ve just got it here for demonstration purposes. if we

fire it...” he turned and shouted: “clear downrange?!”

“Clear!”

Nadeau nodded, and then clicked on something on the laptop that had been wired into the gun. It discharged with its characteristic “*thwoomp!*” and the pig jerked on its chain as if punched. Tremblay had seen it before, and it was equally unimpressive now.

“Okay...?” he repeated.

“and now we fire the prototype.” Nadeau said, looking thoroughly pleased with himself. He turned to the laptop again.

“Proto—?”

THWOOOMB!!

A slurry of liquified meat and red, wet bone shards slapped all over the banked sand against the back wall of the range. There was a pop and sizzle from the box of electronics, and one of the technicians hastily trained a CO2 fire extinguisher on it.

Nadeau was grinning like the Cheshire Cat. “More power!” he exclaimed, quoting an old TV series.

“That’s...Impressive. Okay. So we know those things can get powerful enough to kill us, then.” Tremblay said, and cleared his throat. Nadeau sobered somewhat.

“Well...yes.” he conceded. “But there are a few snags. That rack over there...” he pointed at a van-sized structure against one wall, which was plugged into a generator in the corner, and connected to the prototype weapon via a wrist-thick black cable. “...is a buttload of supercapacitors. We’re

still working on reverse-engineering the alien capacitors from the gun we took apart, and we think those are likely to be a couple of orders of magnitude more efficient per kilogram than ours. But even if we get the capacitors figured out, that's only half the job."

"Not enough power to feed them?" Tremblay asked.

"That's the second snag, yeah. Try as we might we haven't even *begun* to understand how the generators inside these guns work. We've built what we think are exact replicas but when we try to turn them on they either do nothing, melt, or explode. Once we've cracked those..."

The captain shrugged. "But for now it takes us half an hour on *that-*" he indicated the generator in the corner—"to charge up for a pulse that'd even hurt. We had to charge it all night to prepare for this demonstration." "If you ran that

kind of voltage through me all night, I'd be dead." Tremblay pointed out.

"And there's snag three, they're hugely wasteful of energy. Chucking that kind of power through a gauss gun would be a much more effective way to kill something. And this is a *weapon*, boss, so we have to assume that from ET's point of view there's some advantage to these things that excuses the drawbacks."

"What might those be?"

"Well, zero recoil for a start." Nadeau ticked off on his fingers. "Literally none. Which, if these things are as weak as the biologists think is probably a huge boon. And I guess with no barrel to accelerate a physical projectile the gun can reconfigure itself for any anatomy without having to accommodate a long, straight component with a mechanism

at the end. Solid-state electronics can be a lot more flexible. Low maintenance, too: it *can't* jam because there's no moving parts. And if your generators are able to extract huge amounts of power out of rainbows and wishes like these alien ones seem to, you've got unlimited ammo, too."

"But for our purposes they're effectively worthless."

Tremblay concluded for him.

"Far from it. The potential applications of an electrostatic force field generator are incredible, both for the military and for civilian use. Never mind the capacitors, generators and nanoelectronics." Nadeau pointed at the prototype. "And make no mistake boss, that's all us. There's not a single alien component in that whole projector, so we've cracked the pulse emitters. The capacitors and generators will follow soon enough."

Both men looked up and cocked their heads as the tannoy called for General Tremblay to his office.

He clapped Nadeau on the arm as he turned to leave.

“Outstanding work, Captain.

This is the best news I’ve had yet since we started planning this facility. Keep me posted.”

“Will do, sir.”

It had been an eventful month, in so far as there *were* months on a planet with three moons. It was kinda hard to tell.

♪”*A drink in my hand, my snow up against the burning sand, Probably getting gorgeously tanned...* “♪”

Then again, all the months were eventful. Just living was a constant demand on his time.

Today, for instance? Firewood. He was dragging a log through the snow, singing to himself as his boots crunched through the thick drifts and fat flakes drifted among the trees to encrust his beard and hair.

They were good boots. He'd have been dead five years ago if they weren't. But that was the kind of thought that made him feel lonely, so he sang a little louder.

♪”...*can't wait to see, what my buddies all think of me. Just imagine how much cooler I'll be...* “♪

He was beginning to wonder if he was going strange.

He heaved on the rope over his shoulder and sighed in relief as he made it over the crest of the small rise that hid his camp from view, from most angles. It was a circular thing, refined several times over the years. The outer wall was a ring of leg-thick logs, notched together pretty tight and then daubed with clay and dry grass. It kept the wind out perfectly.

inside, it was a little wider across than he was tall. The covered shelter on one side kept his stuff dry, and thank God for the hard-wearing tarps he'd had with him when the Corti took him. Five years on, and they were still intact and working great. He'd weathered a lot of blizzards in that shelter, and felt dry and snug and cozy every time.

Problem was, he was going to have to weather a lot more, probably. Not like anybody back on Earth knew where he

was, even if they *had* somehow invented the warp drive since he'd left.

So why not go strange? Not like anyone was around to notice or care.

♪”...*both so intense, put ‘em together it just makes sense!*
Rrr Raht da daht dah dah dah... “♪

With a grunt, he pulled the firewood log onward. It was the sixth and last of the day. He'd split them tomorrow: the days weren't long at this end of the year, and he still had to go check the nearby burrows for hibernating critters and try to dig up some of the crunchy bulbs that kinda-sorta-almost stood in for both onion and garlic at the same time. He wasn't short on provisions *yet*, but that was only because he stayed on top of the food situation through daily effort.

*“♪...a good time to stay in and cuddle, but put me in summer and I’ll be a...♪ **HNNGH!!**”*

With one last effort, he heaved the log on top of the stack. He watched it rattle into place, patted some snow out of his beard, and stood silently enjoying the simple pleasure of his own successful efforts.

Then, suddenly, he thrust his hands triumphantly into the air.

“Happy snowman!!!”

The shout made snow fall off a nearby tree before vanishing forever into the faint, dead, white-noise hiss of gentle snowfall. He grinned, then threw a few of his remaining split logs into the fire pit and grabbed a cup of the “coffee” he made from roasted alien nuts. It warmed his hands and

his belly as he sat on his bed and treated himself to a short, well-earned break.

”...Good work, Julian.”

He was gonna live for another day.

It had been an eventful month, and a frustrating one, and “Kirk” was once again cursing his own sense of integrity. He doubted that any of the other councillors had even heard the name Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli, let alone read his books, but frankly it didn’t matter. Whether one’s species were ten-limbed gracile grazers, compact little bundles of raw predatory strength, or shambling hillocks of shaggy fur who communicated in part via bioluminescence, the universal constant seemed to be politics.

Kirk was not cut out to be a politician. He was too honest and forthright. Sure, the constituents loved him and so long as he kept bringing in votes then his party were happy to turn a blind eye to the inconvenient way in which he continued to tell the straightforward truth to a camera lens, but winning public opinion was much less than half the job. At the debating table, straight-talking honesty just meant that you were following an easily intercepted, easily interfered-with trajectory, and your position needed an overwhelming momentum of truth, morality and—above all else—vacuousness if it was likely to succeed.

Few politicians were willing to commit to a policy that actually achieved something, on the grounds that if it was capable of doing so, then it was also capable of a spectacular backfire.

But, the Vzk'tk Domain had signed up to the newly-formed Interspecies Committee on Dangerous Lifeforms and, being both a member of the Interspecies Dominion's security council and its undisputed expert on humanity, Kirk had been assigned there. It was gratifying that the Domain took the Committee seriously at least, because most of the other major galactic powers—the Corti Directorate, the Grand Houses of Kwmbwrw, the Rauwryhr Republic, the Chehnash State, plus the Corporate Coalition, the Alliance of the Uplifted and the Guild of Free Spacers—all seemed to have used it as a dumping ground for their most obfuscating, obtuse and obstructive delegates.

At least the Clans of Gao and the Guvnuragnaguvendrugun Confederacy seemed to be taking the issue seriously as well. While Kirk wasn't well-acquainted with the elderly, white-furred Gaoian delegate—Father Oori, of Clan Highmountain

—he thankfully had a staunch and constant ally in Councillor Vedregnenug.

Vedreg was an old and constant friend and a rather more shrewd operator than Kirk would ever be. They formed a “good cop, bad cop” team at the table, with Kirk playing the firebrand, forthright bad cop who bullied the Committee with proposals that had actual substance, and Vedreg playing the good cop who wheedled, placated and silver-tongued them into agreeing to do what they had, minutes before, been staunchly opposed to on principle. It was a potent combination but slow going, and Kirk was glad when the mediator program declared that the day’s deliberations had come to an end. His head felt hot and densely-packed from too many long hours listening to too many insufferable bores repeat too many variations of the exact same stance,

which he could have summed up in a single word had he wanted.

“Caution.”

“I beg your pardon, councillor?” asked one of the station’s janitors. She was a V’ztk, cousin species to Kirk’s own Rrrtktktp’ch. More numerous, but... well. By any objective measure, less intelligent. They tended to form the working class in Domain society, while Rrrtk like Kirk naturally drifted into positions of authority. It was a shame, really.

Kirk started at the query and raised his head: He had clearly dozed off and was now alone in the meeting room save for the custodial machine. “...Nothing. Where the hell are my aides?”

“They judged that you desired some time alone, Councillor. Should I summon them?”

“No. Thank you.” He stood and stretched, rolling the long neck for which both the species of the Domain were famed and enjoying the feeling as the long flexible sheath of cartilage that protected his spinal cord was massaged by the gentle motion. It took some time. Then he returned his attention to the janitor and her cleaning drone, which was playing a kinetic manipulation field across the carpet under the table, collecting fallen detritus, shed fur and skin-dust.

“Does this station have an observation deck?”

“It does, councillor, though Councillor Vedregnenug asked me to invite you to his biodeck when you wake up.”

“Biodeck?” Kirk repeated, having not heard of such a thing before.

“It’s part of his personal suite. He said the elevator could take you there, and there will be fresh *Cqcq*leaves and mature *zrrks*. ”

She sounded quite envious of that last point, and Kirk knew why. A truly venerable *zrrk* that had had plenty of time to partially rot down and liquefy was a rare delicacy, this far from the Domain’s homeworlds.

“Thank you,” he said, and left her to her work.

The elevator needed a full minute to run the full length of the station from the meeting room to the VIP residential ring, but when he stepped out of it, Kirk’s impatience evaporated. It was stunning. Vedreg must have spent an

enormous amount of money in having this structure tacked on to his apartments. Even now, at the height of an ongoing interstellar civilisation that had lasted for since before humans had even figured out basic metals, space was at a premium aboard stations, and therefore expensive.

Nevertheless, Vedreg had acquired a substantial personal suite, and turned it into a garden with a geodesic shell that afforded a wonderful view of the stars and shone tuned simulated sunlight into each of the simulated biomes.

the containment fields that kept the air and temperature from mingling between each one were barely-visible scarlet sheets of iridescence in the air, and behind them was a little patch of soil crowded with plant life from several major planets.

Kirk wandered entranced past a Nurugvugundrugevdrevegagnugnum reef from Vedreg's own homeworld. The name translated literally as "Place where all life is welcome and thrives as one, harmoniously." Some of the plants fluoresced at him as he walked past, turning to capture a fraction of his body heat.

Elsewhere, he saw a sandy Cortan biome, full of sandstickles and triproot tended by little tumbling Rockskitters. Kirk paused to admire a lush frond of Cqcq from his own homeworld, and was contemplating leaning in past the containment field to sample some of its rich leaves when his gaze alighted upon the centerpiece of the biodeck.

This field was stronger and more visible, and as he approached it, subtle warning markers appeared, displayed holographically along its top and bottom in the universal

“danger blue” used all over the Interspecies Dominion to warn of hazards. They stated simply that the field was set to be impassible, and that the environment beyond contained biohazardous atmospheric contaminants, dangerous airborne allergens and venomous fauna.

He recognised what stood in the middle instantly: three young trees, an Oak, an Apple tree, and a Cherry, the latter currently in full lush bloom. Around their bases, being tended by a variety of small gardener drones, was a bed of flowers.

His implants received the relevant information as he studied them: Pansies, Hellebore, Lilac, Puschkinia and more. Golden-and-white fish mouthed lazily in a lenticular pond to one side, and bees hummed back and forth from a hive opposite.

“I thought you would find the centerpiece most interesting.” Vedreg commented, and Kirk started. His friend had been present all along, seated on a bench configured for his species and apparently enjoying the exact same view.

“Beautiful!” Kirk exclaimed. “But how can it be here? Earth is a protected world and a Class Twelve, how could you possibly have acquired these?”

“Wealth and influence.” Vedreg declared, and his bioluminescent flank turned a shade of contrite taupe. “An intimate working knowledge of the minutiae of galactic law and, of course, the knowledge that three of the most successful antibiotics that the Corti have released in the last fifty cycles were derived from samples collected on Earth.”

“I don’t follow you.” Kirk told him.

“The laws only apply to samples directly collected from Earth. As these are cultivars or seed from specimens collected on Earth before the quarantine came into effect, they are, legally speaking, exempt from it. I assure you, every single one is completely legal to own.”

Bands of smug yellow and blue stippled down him. “A councillor cannot be caught in possession of contraband, after all. Arranging that these specimens would not be contraband was, how do they say it? Child’s play.”

“Aren’t they dangerous?” Kirk asked. “What about the microorganisms? The bacteria?”

“Don’t worry, I had them sterilized as much as possible. Though the symbiotic Mycorrhizal fungi in their roots had to remain, and *those* would prove to be extremely tenacious should they escape into another of these biomes, not to

mention fatal for the unfortunate flora it infected. The pollens, however, would have us both in anaphylactic shock very swiftly indeed should the field fail. Securing against that scenario was very costly indeed.”

Green swept up Vedreg’s flank backwards—the equivalent of a sniff. “From what I understand, even humans with their fearsome immune systems can suffer quite profusely from their effects.”

“And the warning about the venomous fauna?”

“Purely a legal requirement. While those bees could land you in the medical bay if they stung you, they won’t, as a rule, since doing so is fatal to them also.”

”...Really?”

“Oh yes. Remarkable creatures. Survival of the whole in one of the galaxy’s most hostile competitive environments through instinctive self-sacrifice of the individual. Have you read Richard Dawkins?”

“I haven’t, no.” Kirk detected the steady soft glow of purple light that indicated Vedreg’s approval and respect, though whether for the author or for the insect was unclear.

“I suspect only a Human would have been in a position to pick up on the concepts he did. *‘The selfish gene,’* he called it. Excellent book. It explains that the process of evolution is an inherently selfish one, from the perspective of the allele. I’m no biologist, but I understand much more of what they’re saying for having read it.”

“If it’s selfish, why aren’t all our worlds like that?” Kirk asked, waving one of his longer, uppermost arms at the

Terran terrarium.

“Because on most worlds the optimal selfish survival strategy for your average gene is to not rock the boat,” Vedreg explained “Life enters a reciprocal, interconnected harmony and stays there, changing only slowly if at all. But life on Earth has too many factors outside of the food chains stirring things up: asteroid strikes, storms, intense seasons, climate shifts, tectonic activity...delicate webs of interdependent species would collapse wholesale down there in short order the first time a major eruption increased the particulate dust in the atmosphere... Only the aggressive survive.” He glowed yellowish-green stippled with blue, white and bands of darkness—a complicated emotional cocktail of respect, admiration, intimidation, and sadness.

“It’s no wonder the humans struggle so hard to remain balanced and in-tune with nature.” He said. “Their whole genetic history has granted survival only to those that ruthlessly seized every opportunity for advancement.”

“Are you always this melancholy, Vedreg?” Kirk asked.

“Only when I have received terrible news, old friend.”

“What news?”

“My government is taking matters into its own hands and preparing to enforce the Quarantine around Earth with extreme prejudice.”

Kirk stood still, processing this. Finally, speaking delicately, he was able to summon up his wits to ask the important question.

”...Could you please define ‘*extreme prejudice?*’”

Vedreg’s strips were completely inert, showing no colour at all, not even a neutral paleness, a sign of deepest sorrow and regret. He handed over an infopad.

“As of right now, a fleet of warships is en route to Sol. Their objective is to deploy an experimental device.”

“A *weapon?!?*” Kirk couldn’t believe it. He began scanning the files as Vedreg replied.

“Mercifully not. Panicked herd beasts though they are, my people are not genocidal. No, this device will simply erect a containment barrier around the entire system. Powered by a fraction of Sol’s own radiation, it will last for several million cycles.”

His flanks became a line of dark, angry green for just a moment, before shading to blue—bitter amusement. “No, we are not genocidal, but, it seems, we are happy Apartheidists. For the simple crime of evolving on the wrong world, the Guvnuragnaguvendrugun Confederacy has sentenced the species *homo sapiens* to indefinite incarceration.

“Effective when?”

Vedreg sighed—one of the few emotional vocalisations his species had available to them.

“Effective, my dear Kirk, as of [*twenty minutes*]ago.”